

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

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Born: January 27, 1756 in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 05, 1791 in Vienna, Austria

Nationality: Austrian

Occupation: Composer

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) was an Austrian composer whose mastery of the whole range of contemporary instrumental and vocal forms--including the symphony, concerto, chamber music, and especially the opera--was unrivaled in his own time and perhaps in any other.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born on Jan. 27, 1756, in Salzburg. His father, Leopold Mozart, a noted composer and pedagogue and the author of a famous treatise on violin playing, was then in the service of the archbishop of Salzburg. Together with his sister, Nannerl, Wolfgang received such intensive musical training that by the age of 6 he was a budding composer and an accomplished keyboard performer. In 1762 Leopold presented his son as performer at the imperial court in Vienna, and from 1763 to 1766 he escorted both children on a continuous musical tour across Europe, which included long stays in Paris and London as well as visits to many other cities, with appearances before the French and English royal families.

Mozart was the most celebrated child prodigy of this time as a keyboard performer and made a great impression, too, as composer and improviser. In London he won the admiration of so eminent a musician as Johann Christian Bach, and he was exposed from an early age to an unusual variety of musical styles and tastes across the Continent.

Salzburg and Italy, 1766-1773

From his tenth to his seventeenth year Mozart grew in stature as a composer to a degree of maturity equal to that of his most eminent older contemporaries; as he continued to expand his conquest of current musical styles, he outstripped them. He spent the years 1766-1769 at Salzburg writing instrumental works and music for school dramas in German and Latin, and in 1768 he produced his first real operas: the German *Singspiel* (that is, with spoken dialogue) *Bastien und Bastienne* and the opera buffa *La finta semplice*. Artless and naive as *La finta semplice* is when compared to his later Italian operas, it nevertheless shows a latent sense of character portrayal and fine accuracy of Italian text setting. Despite his reputation as a prodigy, Mozart found no suitable post open to him; and with his father once more as escort Mozart at age 14 (1769) set off for Italy to try to make his way as an opera composer, the field in which he openly declared his ambition to succeed and which offered higher financial rewards than other forms of composition at this time.

In Italy, Mozart was well received: at Milan he obtained a commission for an opera; at Rome he was made a member of an honorary knightly order by the Pope; and at Bologna the Accademia Filarmonica awarded him membership despite a rule normally requiring candidates to be 20 years old. During these years of travel in Italy and returns to Salzburg between journeys, he produced his first large-scale settings of opera seria (that is, court opera on serious subjects): *Mitridate* (1770), *Ascanio in Alba* (1771), and *Lucio Silla* (1772), as well as his first String Quartets. At Salzburg in late 1771 he renewed his writing of Symphonies

(Nos. 14-21).

In these operatic works Mozart displays a complete mastery of the varied styles of aria required for the great virtuoso singers of the day (especially large-scale da capo arias), this being the sole authentic requirement of this type of opera. The strong leaning of these works toward the singers' virtuosity rather than toward dramatic content made the opera seria a rapidly dying form by Mozart's time, but in *Lucio Silla* he nonetheless shows clear evidence of his power of dramatic expression within individual scenes.

Salzburg, 1773-1777

In this period Mozart remained primarily in Salzburg, employed as concertmaster of the archbishop's court musicians. In 1773 a new archbishop took office, Hieronymus Colloredo, who was a newcomer to Salzburg and its provincial ways. Unwilling to countenance the frequent absences of the Mozarts, he declined to promote Leopold to the post of chapel master that he had long coveted. The archbishop showed equally little understanding of young Mozart's special gifts. In turn Mozart abhorred Salzburg, but he could find no better post. In 1775 he went off to Munich, where he produced the opera buffa *La finta giardiniera* with great success but without tangible consequences. In this period at Salzburg he wrote nine Symphonies (Nos. 22-30), including the excellent No. 29 in A Major; a large number of divertimenti, including the *Haffner Serenade*; all of his six Concertos for violin, several other concertos, and church music for use at Salzburg.

Mannheim and Paris, 1777-1779

Despite his continued productivity, Mozart was wholly dissatisfied with provincial Austria, and in 1777 he set off for new destinations: Munich, Augsburg, and prolonged stays in Mannheim and Paris. Mannheim was the seat of a famous court orchestra, along with a fine opera house. He wrote a number of attractive works while there (including his three Flute Quartets and five of his Violin Sonatas), but he was not offered a post.

Paris was a vastly larger theater for Mozart's talents (his father urged him to go there, for "from Paris the fame of a man of great talent echoes through the whole world," he wrote his son). But after 9 difficult months in Paris, from March 1778 to January 1779, Mozart returned once more to Salzburg, having been unable to secure a foot-hold and depressed by the entire experience, which had included the death of his mother in the midst of his stay in Paris. Unable to get a commission for an opera (still his chief ambition), he wrote music to order in Paris, again mainly for wind instruments: the Sinfonia Concertante for four solo wind instruments and orchestra, the Concerto for flute and harp, other chamber music, and the ballet music *Les Petits riens*. In addition, he was compelled to give lessons to make money. In his poignant letters from Paris, Mozart described his life in detail, but he also told his father (letter of July 31, 1778), "You know that I am, so to speak, soaked in music, that I am immersed in it all day long, and that I love to plan works, study, and meditate." This was the way in which the real Mozart saw himself; it far better reflects the actualities of his life than the fictional image of the carefree spirit who dashed off his works without premeditation, an image that was largely invented in the 19th century.

Salzburg, 1779-1781

Returning to Salzburg once more, Mozart took up a post as court conductor and violinist. He chafed again at the constraints of local life and his menial role under the archbishop. In Salzburg, as he wrote in a letter, "one hears nothing, there is no theater, no opera." During these years he concentrated on instrumental

music (Symphony Nos. 32-34), the Symphonie Concertante for violin and viola, several orchestral divertimenti, and (despite the lack of a theater) an unfinished German opera, later called *Zaide* .

In 1780 Mozart received a long-awaited commission from Munich for the opera seria *Idomeneo*, musically one of the greatest of his works despite its unwieldy libretto and one of the great turning points in his musical development as he moved from his peregrinations of the 1770s to his Vienna sojourn in the 1780s. *Idomeneo* is, effectively, the last and greatest work in the entire tradition of dynastic opera seria, an art form that was decaying at the same time that the great European courts, which had for decades spent their substance on it as entertainment, were themselves beginning to sense the winds of social and political revolution. Mozart's only other work in this genre, the opera seria *La clemenza di Tito* (1791), was a hurriedly written work composed on demand for a coronation at Prague--and it is significantly not cast in the traditional large dimensions of old-fashioned opera seria, with its long arias, but is cut to two acts like an opera buffa and has many features of the new operatic design Mozart evolved after *Idomeneo*.

Vienna, 1781-1791

Mozart's years in Vienna, from age 25 to his death at 35, encompass one of the most prodigious developments in so short a span in the history of music. While up to now he had demonstrated a complete and fertile grasp of the techniques of his time, his music had been largely within the range of the higher levels of the common language of the time. But in these 10 years Mozart's music grew rapidly beyond the comprehension of many of his contemporaries; it exhibited both ideas and methods of elaboration that few could follow, and to many the late Mozart seemed a difficult composer. Franz Joseph Haydn's constant praise of him came from his only true peer, and Haydn harped again and again on the problem of Mozart's obtaining a good and secure position, a problem no doubt compounded by the jealousy of Viennese rivals.

Mozart disparaged many of his less gifted contemporaries in scathing terms; Leopold often entreated him to write in a simple and pleasing style ("What is slight can still be great"). Replying to such a plea, Mozart (letter of Dec. 28, 1782, from Vienna) wrote of his own work in a way that might apply to much of his music: "These concertos [K. 413-415] are a happy medium between what is too easy and what is too difficult ... there are passages here and there from which only connoisseurs can derive satisfaction; but these passages are written in such a way that the less learned cannot fail to be pleased, though without knowing why."

The major instrumental works of this period encompass all the fields of Mozart's earlier activity and some new ones: six symphonies, including the famous last three: No. 39 in E-flat Major, No. 40 in G Minor, and No. 41 in C Major (the *Jupiter*--a title unknown to Mozart). He finished these three works within 6 weeks during the summer of 1788, a remarkable feat even for him.

In the field of the string quartet Mozart produced two important groups of works that completely overshadowed any he had written before 1780: in 1785 he published the six Quartets dedicated to Haydn (K. 387, 421, 428, 458, 464, and 465) and in 1786 added the single *Hoffmeister* Quartet (K. 499). In 1789 he wrote the last three Quartets (K. 575, 589, and 590), dedicated to King Frederick William of Prussia, a noted cellist. The six Quartets dedicated to Haydn undoubtedly owe something to Mozart's study of the earlier work of Haydn, perhaps most to the self-asserted "new and special manner" of Haydn's Op. 33 of 1781, a phrase that may refer to the complete participation in these works of all four instruments in the motivic development. Mozart's works entirely meet the standards set by Haydn up to now, and surpass it.

Other chamber music on the highest level of imagination and craftsmanship from Mozart's Vienna years includes the two Piano Quartets, seven late Violin Sonatas, the last Piano Trios, and the Piano Quintet with winds; and in the last five years of his life, the last String Quintets and the Clarinet Quintet. This decade also saw the composition of the last 17 of Mozart's Piano Concertos, almost all written for his own performance. They represent the high point in the literature of the classical concerto, and in the following generation only Ludwig van Beethoven was able to match them.

A considerable influence upon Mozart's music during this decade was his increasing acquaintance with the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frederick Handel, which in Vienna of the 1780s was scarcely known or appreciated. Through the private intermediacy of an enthusiast for Bach and Handel, Baron Gottfried van Swieten, Mozart came to know Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier*, from which he made arrangements of several fugues for strings with new preludes of his own. He also made arrangements of works by Handel, including *Acis and Galatea*, the *Messiah*, and *Alexander's Feast*.

In a number of late works--especially the *Jupiter* Symphony, *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*), and the *Requiem*--one sees an overt use of contrapuntal procedures, which reflects Mozart's awakened interest in contrapuntal techniques at this period. But in a more subtle sense much of his late work, even where it does not make direct use of fugal textures, reveals a subtlety of contrapuntal organization that doubtless owed something to his deepened experience of the music of Bach and Handel.

Operas of the Vienna Years

Mozart's evolution as an opera composer between 1781 and his death is even more remarkable, perhaps, since the problems of opera were more far-ranging than those of the larger instrumental forms and provided less adequate models. In opera Mozart instinctively set about raising the perfunctory dramatic and musical conventions of his time to the status of genuine art forms. A reform of opera from triviality had been successfully achieved by Christoph Willibald Gluck, but Gluck cannot stand comparison with Mozart in pure musical invention. Although *Idomeneo* may indeed owe a good deal to Gluck, Mozart was immediately thereafter to turn away entirely from opera seria. Instead he sought German or Italian librettos that would provide stage material adequate to stimulate his powers of dramatic expression and dramatic timing through music.

The first important result was the German *Singspiel* entitled *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782; Abduction from the Seraglio). Not only does it have an immense variety of expressive portrayals through its arias, but what is new in the work are its moments of authentic dramatic interaction between characters in ensembles. Following this bent, Mozart turned to Italian opera, and he was fortunate enough to find a librettist of genuine ability, a true literary craftsman, Lorenzo da Ponte. Working with Da Ponte, Mozart produced his three greatest Italian operas: *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786; The Marriage of Figaro), *Don Giovanni* (1787, for Prague), and *Così fan tutte* (1790).

Figaro is based on a play by Pierre Caron de Beaumarchais, adapted skillfully by Da Ponte to the requirements of opera. In *Figaro* the ensembles become even more important than the arias, and the considerable profusion of action in the plot is managed with a skill beyond even the best of Mozart's competitors. Not only is every character convincingly portrayed, but the work shows a blending of dramatic action and musical articulation that is probably unprecedented in opera, at least of these dimensions. In *Figaro* and other late Mozart operas the singers cannot help enacting the roles conceived by the

composer, since the means of characterization and dramatic expression have been built into the arias and ensembles. This principle, grasped by only a few composers in the history of music, was evolved by Mozart in these years, and, like everything he touched, totally mastered as a technique. It is this that gives these works the quality of perfection that opera audiences have attributed to them, together with their absolute mastery of musical design.

In *Don Giovanni* elements of wit and pathos are blended with the representation of the supernatural onstage, a rare occurrence at this time. In *Così fan tutte* the very idea of "operatic" expression--including the exaggerated venting of sentiment--is itself made the subject of an ironic comedy on fidelity between two pairs of lovers, aided by two manipulators.

In his last opera, *The Magic Flute* (1791), Mozart turned back to German opera, and he produced a work combining many strands of popular theater but with means of musical expression ranging from quasi-folk song to Italianate coloratura. The plot, put together by the actor and impresario Emanuel Schikaneder, is partly based on a fairy tale but is heavily impregnated with elements of Freemasonry and possibly with contemporary political overtones.

On concluding *The Magic Flute*, Mozart turned to work on what was to be his last project, the *Requiem*. This Mass had been commissioned by a benefactor said to have been unknown to Mozart, and he is supposed to have become obsessed with the belief that he was, in effect, writing it for himself. Ill and exhausted, he managed to finish the first two movements and sketches for several more, but the last three sections were entirely lacking when he died. It was completed by his pupil Franz Süssmayer after his death, which came on Dec. 5, 1791. He was given a third-class funeral.

Further Readings

- The most important source materials on Mozart available in English are *The Letters of Mozart and His Family, Chronologically Arranged*, edited by Emily Anderson (3 vols., 1938; 2d ed. 1966); and Otto Erich Deutsch, *Mozart: A Documentary Biography* (1964). The most comprehensive study in English of Mozart is Alfred Einstein, *Mozart: His Character, His Work* (1945). Robert Gutman's *Mozart: A Cultural Biography* (1999) interweaves the chronology of Mozart's life and musical compositions with essays on the social, political and religious fabrics of the 18th century.
- Studies of individual works or groups of works include Edward J. Dent, *Mozart's Operas: A Critical Study* (1913; 2d ed. 1947); Georges de Saint-Foix, *The Symphonies of Mozart* (1947); C. M. Girdlestone, *Mozart's Piano Concertos* (1948); Siegmund Levarie, *Mozart's Le Nozze de Figaro: A Critical Analysis* (1952); and *The Mozart Companion*, edited by H. O. Robbins Landon and Donald Mitchell (1956). A more recent biography of Mozart can be found in John Rosselli's *The Life of Mozart* (1998). A wide variety of analysis is in the special Mozart issue of the *Musical Quarterly* (1956), reprinted as *The Creative World of Mozart*, edited by Paul Henry Lang (1956). For analyses of his works see Felix Salzer, *Structural Hearing* (2 vols., 1952; rev. ed. 1962).

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